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A SOUTHERN VIEW OF THE SOUTH

Jonathan Daniels's Sweeping and Revealing Voyage of Discovery



Dan Leyre Photo.

A Plantation Home in Louisiana.

A SOUTHERNER DISCOVERS THE SOUTH. By Jonathan Daniels. 346 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$3.

By HUDSON STRODE

DURING recent months four significant books by four of the South's most enlightened Southerners have appeared: Prescott Webb's eye-opening "Divided We Stand"; Gerald Johnson's slim, but loaded, "A Wasted Land"; Donald Davidson's urbane "The Attack on Leviathan," and now Jonathan Daniels's "A Southerner Discovers the South." Of the four Mr. Daniels's is the most lively, for he writes not an economic treatise, a sociological document or a series of shrewd literary essays but in the medium of interpretative travel lore. There are movement and conversation and description aplenty. Through the sharply contrasting chapters one gets a feel of the contemporary region, some of its charm, its dilapidation, its beauty, despair, comedy and tragedy, and a hint of its direction.

Few could be better qualified to write an intelligent appraisal of the South and its mythological people than Mr. Daniels. He was born in North Carolina, educated at the State University; he lives in Raleigh, where he is editor of *The News and Observer*. For a decade he has reviewed books on the South for New York literary journals. To learn still more about his compatriots in other parts of Dixie, Mr. Daniels set out on a voyage of discovery

in the Spring of 1937. In interpreting the region he wanted to gauge how much stress "should go on climate or on Negroes, lost grandeur or present poverty * * * the fact that life was so easy it was taken too easily, the meanness or the jealousy of the Yankees, semi-tropical diseases, slavery, or the shade."

So, beginning at Arlington Cemetery on the Potomac, he motored from Virginia to Arkansas, along the Mississippi Delta to the Gulf, up through the center of Alabama and Georgia to the Atlantic seaboard and thence home. From the broad highways he detoured into varied hinterlands by obscure alleys and doubtful lanes.

He visited factories, plantations, abject tenant farms, the gilded government experiments like Dyess Colony in Arkansas. He interviewed three Governors on their plans for the South's improvement, discussing particularly the

new attitude to Northern industry's migration south. He gave rides to hitch-hikers and heard their flat or salty tales of woe. He talked with educated Negroes and illiterates, white and colored. He was entertained by outstanding aristocrats like Will Percy, poet-lawyer of Greenville, Miss., and leading liberal newspaper editors and columnists like Grover Hall of Montgomery and John Temple Graves 2d. At Norris he talked with shrewd, Illinois-born David Lilienthal, who insists that the Southern hillbillies are far from being biologically exhausted. "They're good folk. All they needed was a chance. * * *

They must be given one. We don't live in a desert. The South is a land rich in resources and the South ought to be a market important to the nation—and there are counties—a good many of them—in the South where the income is less than \$100 a year and

they are by no means all predominately Negro counties." Lilienthal believes that the people themselves, freed from improper restraint and overwhelming handicaps, are capable of providing the good life for themselves. We hope so. We shall see.

The big question mark of Mr. Daniels's book is: How is the South going to overcome its overwhelming handicaps? Only within the past half-dozen years has the region begun to scrutinize with purposeful intent its shortcomings, needs and potential remedies. (The majority of its editors and public men were too busy answering unwarranted attacks from Northern critics like *The Chicago Tribune* to delve beneath a surface diagnosis.) It is a salubrious sign that the majority of Southerners now welcome criticism, however drastic, if intelligent and fair. They realize, as the author justly suggests, they have too long held history between the world and their personal deficiencies.

Much of the fault of the South's backwardness lies in the excessive tenant system—lack of education on the part of the tenants, lack of managerial ability in both tenant and landlord. The system of slavery which once prevailed in the South and under which cotton production was established on a low price level is still exerting an influence on the price of cotton and the income of those who grow it. The protective tariff for industries, which for the last seventy years has penalized farmers approximately 45 per cent of their average annual in-

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O. V. Hunt Photo.
Steel Mills in Birmingham.



Wide World Photo.

The Beginning of the Cotton Harvest.

A Southerner on the South

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come, has been a potent factor in creating a degrading tenancy.

The South is accused of inordinate laziness—and there may be something that breeds inertia in the climate. But if every man, woman and child below the Mason-Dixon Line cultivated cotton assiduously from dawn to dusk from March to November, the South would be no better off. For no decent general standard of living can possibly come to the Cotton Belt until cotton sells at 20 cents a pound, and that day is highly improbable. King Cotton has been as much a traitor to Southern advancement as the Northern protective tariff and the scandalously unfair Northern-made freight rates have been open enemies. Renters or share-croppers, hired choppers and pickers can never hope to live anything but a miserable, half-starved existence as long as they hitch their aspirations to a cotton wagon. And landlords themselves will become more deeply bogged in debt and mortgages year after year. Today both landlords and tenants are far less prosperous than in my childhood. And as the soil erodes and its strength is exhausted by false allegiance to one crop the future looms darker and some unborn sharecropper children face a future more dismal than their heritage.

Yet the fault lies not altogether with cotton, climate, nor the people themselves. "Don't forget," the Governor of Alabama told Mr. Daniels, "this freight-rate business is the heart of the whole Southern problem. It explains nearly everything—poverty, low wages, bad housing. We can't move until we get free." And Mr. Daniels strongly hints that the cruelest aspects of conquest were not involved in reconstruction but in the use of national power to entrench sectional advantage elsewhere over the South. "Strangely, the men who had come down to set slaves free had gone home with victory to make the whole South economically inferior and dependent. * * * The tariff did at least as much damage in Dixie as Sherman and Grant together in making it poor and keeping it poor."

In about the only bitter overflow of indignation in his well-bred, well-balanced volume Mr.

Daniels addresses his cousins in the East thus:

Cato the Elder was no more implacable than the Brahmins of Boston who came after the Abolitionists with considerably cooler heads. The South was not plowed up and planted with salt, as Carthage was. If no more generous, Bostonians (citizens of a region and an attitude and not a town) were less wasteful. They recognized that the South, kept in its place (a place in the nation geographically similar to that of the Negro in the South), might be useful and profitable. It was. And as a Southerner at the end of discovery, I ask now only that they recognize the poverty of the South as a part of the same civilization as Harvard and, in a measure, as the creation of the same people. Cato did not ride through Carthage on the train and blame its conditions on the Carthaginians. That much only I ask of the Yankees.

But neither does Mr. Daniels spare the South. He sees the region in all its self-delusion and pretense and triflingness. But he knows, too, when its people have a clear sense of the tempo of good manners, of good living. He points out the towns where tradition is a positive thing—inimitable, secure, and yet graceful, gay and warm. With steady, clear vision he sees that, while the agrarian system is a pleasant ideal, the South to survive must encourage industry.

As to the book's small faults: occasionally, it seems to me, the author is so intent upon giving the essence of a situation that he obscures his picture and lessens the force of his thesis. And sometimes he falls into the provincial attitude of taking for granted that everybody in the world knows Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So of Such-and-Such merely because Southerners are supposed to know, or to know of, everybody who is anybody from Virginia to Texas. But I doubt if any Northerner will resent his occasional lyrical affection for Southern scenes as much as some closed-mind Southerners will resent his liberal views. If any one in Maine or Wisconsin has the slightest interest in a certain other segment of his civilization, he could not enlighten himself better at present than by reading this authentic, tempered, illuminating and entertaining appraisal of the South in 1938. And surely no Southerner concerned about his homeland's future will pass it by.